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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: HRR REPORT LARGEMLY MISUNDERSTOOD

SUMMARY

¶1. Armenian media devoted considerable coverage to the Department's Human Rights Report. Most of the articles focused on the angry reaction of pro-government politicians. Editorial comment was scarcer, and some came much later. The nature of the editorials had mostly to do with the publication's political position. Much of the criticism implied, or explicitly stated, that the report selectively chose its "facts" and was simply echoing the complaints of the political opposition. Other criticism focused on a perceived "pro-Azeri" characterization of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. The opposition press, which praised the report, tended to choose selective quotes to reinforce its own criticisms of the government. From the reasoning in several of the pieces and comments heard by the PAO, one might conclude that many Armenians believe that the tougher criticism in the report is unconnected to an objective worsening of the human rights situation, but rather the result of decisions made in Washington with respect to where the administration wants to take the bilateral relationship. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNING PARTY CALLS HRR "ONE-SIDED AND SUBJECTIVE"

¶12. Shortly after the release of the Human Rights Report, the respected daily Aravot published an interview with Republican Party spokesman Eduard Sharmazanov, in which he called the Report "one-sided and subjective" and not reflecting Armenia's actual situation. "The report claims that the authorities did not allow citizens to fully exercise their right to change power. I would like to remind our American colleagues, in case they have forgotten so quickly, that in our country people and the society change power through elections and our elections complied with all accepted international standards. I would also like to remind them that, after the election, many ballot boxes were reopened and ballots were recounted at the request of the opposition, which did not add votes to LTP. The report mentions that the police beat citizens, but fails to mention that policemen were beaten, too."

¶13. Sharmazanov disagreed with the HRR's assertion that the media was biased. "I would advise them, (authors of the report), to review objectively the Armenian media at that time and see that the opposition had the opportunity to criticize via the media as much as they wanted. I would like to mention that our colleagues who prepared the report contradict themselves. In particular, during her meeting with Serzh Sargsian, former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted that Armenia has embarked on the road to political reforms."

BIASED ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH

¶14. A week later, Aravot published a front page editorial indicating that the parts of the HRR regarding elections, freedom of speech and the March 1, 2008 protests and violent aftermath were objective and

fair. However, the paper's editor maintains that the same report carries pro-Azeri assessments when it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh. Without being explicit, he seems to be referring to the HRR's characterization of the situation there which is the same as in the 2007 HRR, that is, "Armenia continues to occupy the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani territories." In what is probably more a criticism of the government than the report, the editorial concludes by expressing concern that Armenia's weaknesses regarding human rights issues are being used to pressure Armenia on the Karabakh issue.

¶ 15. On the same day, the generally pro-government, Russian-language Golos Armenii specified that it too objected to the language characterizing the situation in Karabakh and criticized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for not protesting publicly. However, in a muddled editorial that mixed in comments by EUR DAS Bryza and author Tom de Waal, the paper never makes exactly clear what it is about the language that it objects to. And like Aravot, Golos offers no alternative language or example of how it would describe the current circumstances in Nagorno-Karabakh.

A "DOWN PAYMENT" TO THE OPPOSITION

¶ 16. Pro-Government Hayots Ashkhar criticizes the HRR for being subjective and characterizing the February 19 elections and the March events in terms taken directly from the opposition. "The HRR's statements contradict the western assessments regarding the elections and political prisoners. In many cases, the authors of the report crudely 'copied' the 'facts' on the presidential elections presented by the opposition and did not even check with

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the official assessment provided by the mission of international observers.

¶ 17. "The question arises as to who 'provided' the facts that became the basis for serious accusations? Who are those 'anonymous observers' whose information was publicized by the most powerful state? If no source is mentioned, one can only assume that the accusations are based on statements made by the opposition during its rallies. What is the motivation behind such a 'revisionist approach?'... We think that since the old administration's position was different, theoretically the new administration's position should have been reflected only in the 2009 HRR.

¶ 18. "This means that the new administration, with this report, is making a down payment to the radical opposition (which is losing popularity) to give them wings for future actions like March 1, (2008) which in turn, will give the international community new reasons to exert international pressure on Armenia."

ACTIONS THAT AMOUNT TO "TREASON"

¶ 19. In its February 27 issue, oppositional Haykakan Zhamanak says: "This report is the harshest and the most 'disgraceful' among all the reports published since last February's elections." "We think that servants of the anti-democratic processes that have taken place in Armenia during the last year do not begin to understand that this [the report] is the result of their actions that amount to treason."

In its February 28 issue the newspaper writes, "It is worth mentioning that both Human Rights Watch and the State Department report mention that a clash between law enforcement authorities and demonstrators resulted in "at least" 10 deaths. Thus, the State Department also questions the number of victims.

¶ 10. "The 54-page Report of the State Department represents the disgraceful situation of Armenia in such detail, that it even touches upon the morals and manners established in the army and the abuse of power by the authorities such as the governor of Syunik region who broke the jaw of a 16 year-old boy because the latter had a clash with his son. In one word, there is no single positive thing about Armenia in the 54 page report."

NO MISTAKES BY POLICE

¶11. As is often the case in Armenia, many newspapers refrained from editorial comment and chose to make their point by quoting others. Virtually all newspapers covered the press conference held by Police Chief Alik Sargsian. Asked to comment on the State Department Human Rights Report, in particular, his part in last year's March 1 clashes and the actions of the police, Sargsian disagreed with the assessments of the police actions reflected in the report saying: "The law enforcement bodies probably were slow to respond but no mistakes were made. They (the authors of the report) should not target the police. They should look at what is going on in their own country." Coming back to the March 1 events, he said: "The police were probably a little slow to react, and if it could have controlled the situation sooner it would have been possible to avoid March 1. This slowness could even be considered a crime, as it resulted in victims among policemen."

NOT THE WAY TO INFLUENCE ARMENIA

¶12. Official daily HAYASTANI HANRAPETUTIUN reported Republican Party parliamentary leader Galust Sahakian saying "there are various problems associated with human rights issues and democratic processes in Armenia. We will try to find solutions to those issues in our political programs. However, countries which try to have an influence on Armenia should not start by calling it undemocratic." Prosperous Armenia MP Aram Safarian stated, "The issues in the report are already known to us and reflect our reality. The goal of the political forces in Armenia is to take steps to overcome post March 1 developments." He was quick to add that the report by the State Department reflects that country's [United States] interests and foreign policy. He recommended that Armenian authorities become acquainted with the document to know the issues that might affect Armenia-U.S. relations.

¶13. Deputy parliament speaker Hrayr Karapetian, of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun) party, said that it would be wrong to assume that the U.S. has formulated its final opinion on Armenia's democracy, since democratic reforms are ongoing. The parliamentary leader of the Orinats Yerkir Party said the report contains some truths, but noted that the Armenian authorities and the parliament want to change the situation by implementing serious judicial reforms.

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COMMENT

¶14. A conversation with a well-known political analyst from the most widely-watched television station, Public TV, probably gives an indication of the continuing incomprehension of many Armenians concerning the purpose and inspiration for the Human Rights Report. This reporter, returned just a year ago from the U.S. after receiving a Masters Degree in journalism, seriously asked the PAO why the Human Rights Report was so much "tougher" on Armenia this year and was surprised to learn that the report was drafted in the Embassy. From the conversation that ensued, it was clear that even this western-educated reporter worked under the assumption that the Report is a product of, rather than an input to, the policymaking process in Washington. He clearly believed that, for reasons totally unconnected to the objective human rights situation in Armenia, Washington had decided to downgrade the bilateral relationship with Armenia, and the "tougher" HRR was a result of that decision.

Yovanovitch